



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Public policy as a nudger of cultural sustainability amidst rapid urbanization: A case of Delhi NCR.

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Abstract

As of 2025, more than 57% of the global population lives in urban areas, and this number is expected to rise to around 68% by 2050, according to the United Nations. India's urban population has experienced substantial growth, rising from 62 million in 1951 to 285 million in 2001 (Mohan & Dasgupta). Projections indicate that India will add 416 million urban dwellers by 2050, marking the largest urban population increase globally (United Nations, 2018). These urban areas face challenges like climate change, pollution, and resource scarcity. The Central National Capital Region (CNCR) periphery experienced a significant increase in urban population, from 47% in 1991 to 69% in 2011. Urbanization is an inevitable consequence of economic growth and modernization, but its rapid pace often threatens intangible cultural heritage. This city sprawl has led to the displacement of traditional communities, loss of vernacular architecture, and erosion of local festivals leading to deteriorated condition of cultural heritage. This condition has posed a pressing challenge for the authorities and stakeholders. This research paper examines the existing government policy initiatives, focusing on the Delhi NCR and analyzing their implementation, outcomes, and challenges. This paper attempts to investigate the impact of urbanization on culture and the role of public policy in mitigating the challenges posed by rapid urban growth in facilitating cultural sustainability. The review draws upon the secondary data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the policy landscape, key issues, and potential areas for further research and action. The findings highlight the success and shortcomings of these policies and offer recommendations emphasizing the need for community-based approaches, cultural mapping, and inclusive urban policies to ensure that cultural heritage thrives amidst urban expansion.

Keywords: Urbanization, Cultural sustainability, Public Policy, SDG 11, Inclusivity.

"Urbanization is an unstoppable force, but we must ensure that it is inclusive and sustainable."

- Ban Ki-moon

Introduction

United Nations (2018) defined urbanization as the increasing proportion of a country's population living in urban areas due to migration, natural population growth in cities, and the reclassification of rural settlements into urban ones. From a social and cultural perspective, urbanization signifies a shift in societal norms, behaviors, and lifestyles as individuals adopt urban practices such as modern housing, education,

healthcare, and governance (Sassen, 2001). The global trend of urbanization can be seen through the following data as shown in Figure 1 and Table 1.

The pace of urbanization in India has been remarkable, with the urban population rising from 30% in 1950 to a projected 66% by 2050, reflecting a global trend of increasing urbanization (Kautish *et al.*, 2019).

Cities have become the epicenters of innovation, cultural exchange, and economic activity, attracting diverse populations in search of better opportunities. However, this rapid urban expansion often comes at a considerable cost, particularly to cultural heritage. In India, where cultural diversity and heritage form the backbone of national identity, the impacts of urbanization on traditional practices, communities, and architecture are profound.

In present times, megacities in India face unique challenges as they navigate the dual pressures of modernization and globalization. Delhi NCR, being one of India's fastest-growing urban agglomerations, epitomizes the dual challenges of urban growth and cultural

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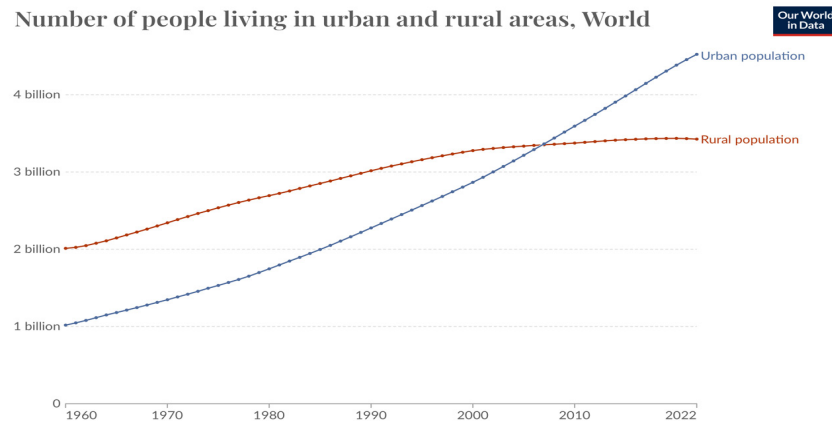


Figure 1: Number of people living in urban and rural areas

Source: Ritchie, H., & Roser, M. (2018). *Urbanization*. Our World in Data. Retrieved from <https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization>

Table 1: Number of people living in urban and rural areas

S.No.	Classification of area	1991		2001		2011	
		Km ²	%	Km ²	%	Km ²	%
1.	Rural	797.66	53.79	558.32	37.65	369.35	24.90
2.	Urban	685.34	46.21	924.68	62.35	1113.65	75.1
3.	Total	1483.00	100.00	1483.00	100.00	1483.00	100.00

Source: Census of India, 1991, 2001 & 2011

sustainability. The growth trajectory of this region has been shaped by its strategic location, administrative significance, and economic opportunities, drawing millions of migrants from across the country. This influx has fuelled infrastructural and economic expansion, transforming the region into a sprawling urban hub. However, this transformation has also displaced indigenous communities, led to the loss of traditional spaces, and diluted local cultural practices. Modern high-rises have replaced the vernacular architecture that once characterized the cityscape, while festivals and traditional crafts increasingly face commercialization and diminishing participation. These trends highlight a growing disconnect between urban development and cultural preservation.

According to Farjami & Türker, 2021, Bakri, 2018 and Szpakowska-Loranc, 2021, Cultural sustainability refers to the preservation and promotion of a society's unique cultural heritage, traditions, and practices, ensuring their continued relevance and vibrancy within the ever-evolving landscape of modern society. In the Indian context, this notion holds particular significance, as the country's rich tapestry of cultural diversity has been a defining characteristic of its identity for centuries (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2016) (Bakri, 2018).

"Cultural diversity is not a liability; it is an asset indispensable to poverty reduction and the achievement of sustainable development."

Kofi Annan
(Former UN Secretary-General)

Cultural sustainability, as a subset of the broader discourse on sustainable development, focuses on preserving and promoting cultural heritage while accommodating modernity. It aligns closely with Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11) of the United Nations, which emphasizes creating inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities. For Delhi NCR, integrating cultural preservation into urban planning is not merely an aspirational goal but an urgent necessity. Cultural heritage, including festivals, arts, crafts and traditional practices, serves as a vital resource for community identity, social cohesion, and economic resilience. Its loss poses risks to the social fabric and undermines the richness of urban life.

This paper explores the intersection of urban growth and cultural sustainability in Delhi NCR, seeking to understand how the region's rapid urbanization impacts its cultural heritage. Drawing on secondary data from migration studies, urban planning documents, and cultural analyses, the research examines the socio-cultural ramifications of urban expansion. It attempts to identify the role of public policy initiatives in preserving cultural heritage amidst the increasing urban population.

Review of Literature

Urbanization and its impact on culture

The impact of urbanization on cultural sustainability is a critical issue that requires careful consideration. As the

population concentrates in urban areas, the traditional cultural practices, values, and heritage that have long defined the fabric of Indian society face the risk of erosion. This process of cultural change, driven by the rapid transformation of physical spaces, poses a significant challenge to the preservation of local identities and the maintenance of a sustainable cultural landscape. The influx of urban culture, characterized by industrialization, information technology, and individualistic lifestyles, can overwhelm and displace local traditions, leading to a homogenization of cultural expression (Sutiyono, 2020). The concentration of populations in urban centers, coupled with the influence of globalization, has threatened the preservation of unique cultural identities and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge and traditions (Suprati *et al.*, 2022). Urbanization often disrupts traditional cultural practices by displacing communities and altering socio-spatial dynamics. Scholars like Sassen (2014) highlight how global cities face cultural homogenization, while Rao (2020) underscores the importance of integrating heritage preservation into urban policies.

This trend has been observed globally, particularly in developing nations experiencing rapid urbanization. In Jimma Town, Ethiopia, for example, the proliferation of unplanned settlements on the urban peripheries has threatened the preservation of local architectural heritage and traditional land use patterns (Nega, 2021). Similarly, in India, the growth of megacities like Mumbai has disrupted the livelihoods and social structures of marginalized communities, leading to a loss of cultural identity and a growing disconnect between the urban elite and the urban poor. At the same time, urbanization has also facilitated the exchange and cross-pollination of cultural elements. The concentration of people in urban areas has enabled the coexistence and interaction of diverse cultural traditions, leading to the emergence of hybrid forms of art, music, cuisine, and lifestyle. This cultural dynamism is particularly evident in the performing arts, where the influence of global media and communication technologies has transformed traditional practices, as seen in the case of Indonesia (Sutiyono, 2020).

The intersection between Urbanization and Cultural Sustainability

Several factors affect the sustainability of cultural heritage amidst rapid urbanization and growth in the context of Delhi NCR. One of the major issues is that urban expansion often requires land acquisition, displacing traditional communities that are the custodians of cultural practices. For example, the communities engaged in traditional crafts, such as pottery in Kumhar Gram or weaving in Najafgarh, face relocation due to urban sprawl (Delhi Development Authority Reports, 2021). Secondly, urbanization leads to the demolition of heritage structures to make way for modern buildings. Areas like

Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi) are undergoing redevelopment, replacing traditional architecture with high-rise apartments and commercial spaces (Rao, S., 2020). The diminishing presence of traditional architecture disrupts the visual and historical identity of the region. Thirdly, migration to Delhi NCR introduces diverse cultural influences but also leads to the homogenization of cultural practices. Traditional practices like Phool Walon Ki Sair have seen reduced participation due to the dominance of modern or globalized cultural trends (Bhagat, R.B., 2017). Urbanization and migration dilute regional languages like Haryanvi, Braj, and Awadhi, which are integral to cultural identity. Fourthly, the commercialization of cultural festivals and traditions affects their authenticity and purpose. Festivals as Commercial Events: Events like Durga Puja and Navratri are increasingly marketed for tourism rather than community participation, impacting their cultural essence (Sharma, R., 2021). Fifthly, the urban planning of metropolitans like Mumbai and Delhi NCR often prioritizes infrastructure over cultural preservation. One such example is The Master Plan for Delhi (MPD) 2041, which includes limited measures for safeguarding intangible heritage or integrating cultural sites into urban projects (Delhi Master Plan, 2021).

Today, traditional public spaces like courtyards and open grounds, which foster cultural activities, are being replaced by malls and gated communities. Sixthly, environmental challenges, such as pollution and resource depletion, can be worsened by urbanization, which invariably affects the cultural sites. Pollution damages monuments like the Qutub Minar and Red Fort, which are not just architectural but cultural landmarks (Archaeological Survey of India Reports, 2020). The land encroachment on the Yamuna floodplains and Aravalli forests in Delhi NCR has disrupted the traditional cultural practices associated with nature. Seventhly, urbanization reshapes social structures, impacting how cultural practices are sustained. Urban housing patterns lead to nuclear families and fragmented social networks, reducing opportunities for collective cultural activities. Busy urban lives limit participation in traditional events, reducing their significance over time.

The Role of Public Policy

The rapid growth of cities has brought about significant changes in economic development, employment, income distribution, and social protections, which in turn have placed new demands on governments and policymakers (Taeuber & Taeuber, 1949). One of the primary challenges of urbanization is the strain it places on infrastructure and public services. As more people flock to urban areas, the demand for utilities, transportation, housing, and other essential services increases dramatically. The continuing urbanization and overall growth of the world's population is projected to add 2.5 billion people to the urban population by 2050, with nearly 90% of the increase

concentrated in Asia and Africa. This rapid influx of people into cities has far-reaching implications, including the need to ensure universal access to health care, education, housing, sanitation, water, food, and energy (Taeuber & Taeuber, 1949). The impact of urbanization on public policy is multifaceted and policymakers are under pressure to develop targeted policies that address the needs of these urban populations, many of whom face significant economic and social challenges. At this moment, it is also essential to note that in order to make urban settlements safe and inclusive, public policy has a larger role to play in preserving heritage and promoting cultural sustainability. These policy initiatives are not only effective in tackling the socio-economic challenges but also provide guidelines and direction to conserve the culture and heritage of a nation. The role of public policy in promoting cultural sustainability can be divided into certain aspects.

The Central Government of India has implemented various initiatives to not only preserve but promote cultural heritage along with multiple actions by the State Government (Delhi NCR), NGOs and corporates who, from time to time, promote cultural sustainability through awareness programs.

Analysis of Public policy initiatives functional in Delhi NCR to promote cultural sustainability

Findings

Analysis of the initiatives

Central Government Initiatives

The Central government initiatives like the National Culture Fund (NCF), HRIDAY, and Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat focus on large-scale preservation and integration of cultural heritage

Table 2: Central government initiatives

Name	Year of launch	Objectives	Area	Impact	Criticism
National Culture Fund (NCF)	1996	Mobilize resources for preserving and promoting India's cultural heritage.	Pan-India, including Delhi NCR	Preserved several heritage sites and facilitated public-private partnerships.	Limited awareness and reliance on external funding.
Scheme for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage	2013	Safeguard intangible cultural heritage like traditional art forms, crafts, and festivals.	Nationwide	Revitalized dying art forms and raised awareness of intangible cultural heritage.	Insufficient outreach and lack of focus on urban areas.
HRIDAY (Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana)	2015	Holistic development of heritage cities while preserving cultural heritage.	Includes Old Delhi	Infrastructure improvement around heritage sites in Delhi.	Limited to specific areas; lacked community participation.
Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat (EBSB)	2015	Strengthen cultural integration and foster inter-state interactions.	Delhi NCR and nationwide	Promoted cultural exchange through educational and cultural programs.	Limited direct impact on urban cultural sustainability in metropolitan areas.
Zonal Cultural Centers (ZCCs)	1986	Promote and preserve regional art, culture, and crafts.	Northern Zone, including Delhi NCR	Organized cultural programs and exhibitions to promote local artists.	Bureaucratic inefficiency and inconsistent funding.

Table 3: State government initiatives (Delhi)

Name	Year of Launch	Objectives	Area	Impact	Criticism
Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation (DTTDC) Cultural Initiatives	1975	Promote Delhi's cultural heritage through festivals and tourism.	Delhi NCR	Successfully organized festivals like Phool Walon Ki Sair and Qutub Festival.	Over-commercialization and lack of community involvement.
Delhi Heritage Management Plan (Master Plan for Delhi)	2021	Identify and preserve heritage sites in Delhi.	Delhi NCR	Developed strategies for integrating cultural preservation into urban planning.	Implementation delays and resource constraints.
Kala Sanskriti Vikas Yojana (Delhi-Specific)	2017	Provide financial assistance to organizations for cultural programs and projects.	Delhi NCR	Encouraged local cultural activities and heritage preservation.	Low funding allocation and limited coverage.

Table 4: Non-government or corporate policy initiatives

Name	Year of Launch	Objectives	Area	Impact	Criticism
Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH)	1984	Protect and conserve India's natural and cultural heritage.	Delhi NCR	Restored key heritage sites like Haveli Dharampura in Old Delhi.	Limited focus on grassroots community involvement.
Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC)	1992	Promote sustainable cultural preservation and urban renewal.	Humayun's Tomb, Delhi	Revitalized Humayun's Tomb Complex and surrounding areas, benefiting local communities.	Primarily focuses on select heritage sites.
Airtel Delhi Arts Festival	2007	Promote contemporary and traditional art forms through annual festivals.	Delhi NCR	Provided a platform for emerging and traditional artists.	Limited impact on smaller art communities.
Times of India's Delhi Heritage Walks	2000s	Encourage public participation in cultural and heritage awareness activities.	Delhi NCR	Increased awareness of Delhi's heritage sites through guided tours.	Primarily targeted at urban elites and tourists.

across India, including Delhi NCR (Table 2). These programs aim to conserve both tangible (monuments, architecture) and intangible (festivals, traditions) cultural heritage.

Criticism

- *Limited Urban Applicability*

Many initiatives lack direct mechanisms for addressing the unique cultural dynamics of urban areas like Delhi NCR.

- *Implementation Delays*

Bureaucratic hurdles and resource constraints often delay project execution, reducing their impact.

- *Over-reliance on Partnerships*

Programs like the National Culture Fund rely heavily on private partnerships, which may not always align with community needs.

- *Generalized Approach*

Programs often cater to broader cultural preservation and fail to address the hyper-localized cultural issues in metropolitan regions.

State Government Initiatives (Delhi-Specific)

The State-level initiatives such as the Delhi Heritage Management Plan and cultural efforts under the Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation (DTTDC) emphasize preserving local heritage sites, organizing cultural events, and integrating culture into urban policies (Table 3).

Criticism

- *Over-commercialization*

Events like the Phool Walon Ki Sair and Qutub Festival are criticized for prioritizing tourist engagement over genuine cultural representation.

- *Inequitable Coverage*

Cultural initiatives often focus on prominent areas like Old Delhi and neglect peripheral regions of Delhi NCR.

- *Low Community Involvement*

Top-down approaches fail to engage local communities, leading to a disconnect between policies and grassroots needs.

- *Funding Constraints*

Programs like Kala Sanskriti Vikas Yojana struggle with inadequate budgets, limiting their scope and effectiveness.

Non-Government and Corporate Initiatives

Non-government organizations (NGOs) like INTACH and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) focus on heritage conservation, while corporate initiatives like the Airtel Delhi Arts Festival and Delhi Heritage Walks aim to popularize cultural engagement among urban populations (Table 4).

Criticism

- *Selective Focus*

Initiatives by NGOs and corporates often concentrate on high-profile heritage sites and festivals, leaving smaller communities and less-known traditions neglected.

- *Elitist Approach*

Many programs target urban elites and tourists, which limits accessibility and inclusivity for marginalized groups.

- *Sustainability Concerns*

Corporate initiatives are sometimes criticized for being event-driven rather than focusing on long-term cultural preservation.

- *Limited Geographic Impact*

The activities are often confined to central Delhi, leaving the broader NCR region underrepresented.

Cross-Cutting Criticisms

- *Lack of Integration Across Stakeholders*

The absence of coordinated efforts among central, state, and non-government stakeholders creates redundancy and

inefficiencies. Programs are often implemented in isolation, reducing their overall impact.

- *Limited Grassroots Engagement*

Most initiatives adopt a top-down approach, failing to involve local communities in planning and execution. This alienates the very groups they aim to empower and preserve.

- *Insufficient Funding and Resources*

Cultural sustainability often takes a backseat in budget allocations compared to infrastructure and economic development. This financial neglect undermines the potential of these programs.

- *Urban Prioritization Over Rural Contexts*

While Delhi NCR receives attention due to its prominence, the broader rural-urban cultural linkages within the region are often ignored, creating gaps in holistic cultural preservation.

Challenges in promoting cultural sustainability in India

Promoting cultural sustainability in India is often overlooked and is faced with multiple challenges at various levels from policy formulation to administration to civil society. Some of these issues can be clubbed as under-

Fragmented Policy Framework

The lack of integrated policies at the central and state level often creates a problematic situation. Cultural sustainability in India is often overlooked and is treated as a secondary issue, with no unified framework linking urban planning, heritage preservation, and cultural development. Multiple governing bodies like the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), NCR Planning Board, and municipal corporations result in fragmented decision-making, hindering cohesive cultural policies. Public policies in India are devised in a way that prioritizes economic growth and infrastructure over cultural preservation, sidelining the latter.

Inadequate Community Involvement

The policies are often implemented without input from local communities, leading to a disconnect between government initiatives and grassroots needs. The traditional cultural practices and knowledge systems are often overshadowed by urban-centric planning that caters to modern lifestyles and global trends leading to their marginalization.

Rapid Urbanization

The redevelopment projects and urban sprawl displace traditional communities, eroding their cultural ecosystems and forcing them to settle in faraway regions. Often, the historical neighborhoods are replaced with modern infrastructure, resulting in the loss of heritage structures that define the city's cultural identity, making them inaccessible to lower-income communities.

Migration and Cultural Homogenization

High migration rates dilute traditional cultural identities, as diverse populations bring new influences that often overshadow local traditions. The urban policies implemented to promote cultural festivals and events for tourism often lead to the loss of authenticity and community ownership.

Commercialization of Cultural Spaces

The current policies mainly focus on maximizing revenue from cultural heritage sites rather than preserving their intrinsic value. Cultural events organized are promoted as one-time spectacles rather than sustained efforts to preserve traditions. The Cultural sustainability initiatives in India often face inadequate funding, especially when compared to other urban development priorities. This is also a reason why there is a crisis of skilled professionals in heritage management and cultural policy, limiting effective implementation.

Environmental Pressures

Environmental degradation, such as air and water pollution, affects the longevity of cultural artifacts and sites. The unregulated urban growth also contributes to encroachment on heritage sites and spaces reserved for cultural practices.

Lack of Awareness and Education

Civil society and urban populations, especially the younger generation, often lack awareness of the importance of cultural heritage because schools and universities do not emphasize enough the significance of cultural sustainability, resulting in a lack of advocacy and innovation.

Bureaucratic Inefficiencies

Policies often face delays due to bureaucratic red tape, reducing their relevance and effectiveness. The funds allocated for cultural initiatives are sometimes misused, leading to suboptimal outcomes and crises for those involved in cultural economies.

Technological Gaps

While digital mapping and archiving can preserve intangible heritage, these tools are underused in policy frameworks. Some cultural groups resist modern methods of preservation, creating conflicts in policy implementation.

Discussion and Recommendations

The existing and local culture in India is encouraged to be preserved and developed further, as culture is often inherently sustainable (Bakri, 2018), which has manifested in daily life, including architecture, and the culture-based production and consumption of space, settlement patterns, building typologies, and traditional construction techniques should be preserved through negotiation (Bakri, 2018).

To promote cultural sustainability in India, there is an urgent need to overcome the abovementioned gaps and

challenges by strengthening and enforcing policies for the protection of monuments and heritage structures, which should also include local heritage in urban master plans, ensuring buffer zones around heritage sites. With tangible heritage, intangible heritage should also be promoted via cultural education programs, festivals, and events showcasing traditional dance, music, food, and crafts at a large scale. One such example is the Delhi International Arts Festival.

Another aspect of consideration can be Sustainable Urban Development with a focus on a culture where green spaces can be constructed with cultural value, e.g., the development of parks with sculptures and spaces for public art (e.g., Ved Van Park, Noida)

In order to promote cultural sustainability it is significant to support the cultural economies and artisans who keep the heritage and culture alive through their art. Policies can be formulated to provide subsidies, grants, or tax incentives to artisans, performers, and cultural entrepreneurs.

Policies should be developed with the vision to promote cultural exchanges between diverse groups in NCR, fostering inclusivity and mutual respect. The migrant artisans should be facilitated by providing workspace and market access.

Sustainable Tourism Development can be another way to facilitate the preservation of cultural heritage by creating dedicated cultural tourism circuits. There inclusion and utilization of technological tools can be done to develop virtual tours of cultural sites.

By integrating these initiatives into urban policies, Delhi NCR can balance modernization with cultural preservation, ensuring long-term cultural sustainability.

Conclusion

In recent years, cultural sustainability has attracted increasing attention within the discourse of sustainable development and sustainable cities in India. Nonetheless, research on the issue is still in a pre-paradigmatic stage, and related empirical studies are scant. In particular, further knowledge is required to understand not only how cultural sustainability has been addressed strategically but also implemented in practice, with a focus on the role of social structures in achieving cultural sustainability goals. (Farjami & Türker, 2021; Bakri, 2018; Errichiello & Micera, 2018; Szpakowska-Loranc, 2021). As a symbol of cultural identity, cultural heritage needs to be sustained for future generations, as it has greatly contributed to environmental sustainability through conventional knowledge and pragmatism, promoting ecologically sustainable patterns of production and consumption, as well as sustainable urban and architectural design solutions (Farjami & Türker, 2021).

The study underscores the urgent need for culturally inclusive urban policies in Delhi NCR. By prioritizing cultural sustainability, policymakers can ensure that urban growth

does not come at the cost of cultural heritage. The findings call for collaborative efforts between government bodies, cultural organizations, and local communities to create resilient urban spaces that celebrate and preserve their rich cultural tapestry.

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